THESIS

MEXICAN AMERICANS: A BILINGUAL AND BICULTURAL COMMUNITY

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Spanish- speaking people of Mexican descent living in the United States call themselves Mexicans, Mexican Americans, Hispanos, Latinos, or Chicanos, depending upon the region in which they have settled, their socioeconomic experiences, their political beliefs, etc. The term "Chicano" was used in the past to designate only lower-class Mexicans, but since the emergence of the Chicano nationalistic movement it has been used as a symbol of the struggle for socioeconomic and linguistic equality, especially with regard to this group's right to maintain and develop their original first language.

Today Mexican Americans constitute the second-largest and most rapidly growing minority in the United States. Nationwide they make up 60 percent of the Hispanic population. They are deeply rooted in the Southwest -that is, in the five states of Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas. Most are Catholic in religion, and a majority are mestizo in racial heritage. They differ from other immigrant groups in their proximity to their cultural homeland.

An important characteristic of Mexican Americans is that they do not form a homogeneous group politically, socially, or racially. Since their incorporation to the United States in 1848 diversity and complexity have

characterized persons of Mexican descent. Some can trace their family residency back 400 years; others migrated north only "yesterday". The immigrants who came in the 1980s clearly did not bring with them a Mexican culture identical to that brought by those who arrived during the 1910 revolution or in the late 1800s. There are also differences in the varying degrees of Caucasian and Indian ancestry, as well as of acculturation and integration.

Despite their diversity, Mexican Americans have a bedrock of cultural identity. They are united by the Spanish language and by a religion which is a part of their daily life and culture. Racism, segregation, and discrimination arising from their minority position have also served to unite them. Mexican Americans have retained traditional aspects of their culture so long because of relative isolation in the United States, closeness to Mexico, ease of travel, and the Spanish-language media.

As far as academic performance is concerned, all studies show that Chicanos are consistently below the other students in all academic studies. The 1966 Coleman Report showed that Chicanos fall significantly behind white students in academic achievement. By the twelfth grade, Chicanos are 4.1 years behind the national norm in math achievement, 3.5 in verbal ability, and 3.3 in reading.

Chicanos are poorly represented in positions which control or influence educational outcomes. They are considerably underrepresented in the faculties of teacher education programmes, on the professional staff of State Departments of Education, and as principals and school board members. In spite of the high concentration of Chicanos in the Southwest, in Southwestern schools they constitute only 10.4 % of superintendents, 5.4 % of counselors, 4 % of teachers, 3.6 % of librarians and 7 % of principals.

In health care Mexican Americans remain near the bottom of the ladder. About one third lack health insurance because their employment does not provide it and they cannot afford it on their incomes. Elderly Mexican Americans are particularly affected. The two-thirds of a million over the age of sixty-five have more health problems than other Americans of comparable age, but they are less likely to receive help from Medicare, social security, or private insurance.

While some progress has been achieved, Mexican Americans continue to face economic, social, and political handicaps. The pace of improvement during the 1960's and 1970's slowed down during the 1980's. Today the nation appears to have little concern for equal opportunity for all, and discrimination and racism seem to be on the rise.

In spite of the many imperfections of life in the United States for people of Mexican descent, most remain hopeful. Thrust out of their homeland by extreme poverty and lack of opportunity, Mexicans continue to cross the border, legally or without documents. In 1900 there were slightly more than 100,000 people of Mexican birth living in the United States. The 13.3 million persons of Mexican descent counted in the 1990 census are willing immigrants and their descendants. This ongoing elective immigration has shaped and continues to reshape Mexican-American culture and community.

This thesis focuses on the following aspects related to the cultural identity of Mexican-Americans: mass migration to the United States; the plight of Mexican-Americans as compared to that of African Americans and other groups of immigrants; the language (Spanglish, code-swirching) and the culture (literature, art, music, films) of Chicanos, and the issues concerning education, especially bilingual education. These points clearly show the conflicts faced by a community that experiences the pull of two remarkably different cultures: Anglo and Mexican, which makes Mexican-Americans not only bilingual but also bicultural.

Chapter 1

THE BEGINNING OF MASS MIGRATION FROM MEXICO

Although a widespread stereotype suggests that nineteenth-century Mexico was a backward, sleepy land, the country in fact achieved striking progess. Mexico astounded foreign observers by its remarkable changes under Don Porfirio Díaz's dictatorship. The *Porfiriato* from 1876 to 1911 achieved for Mexico precisely what successful colonial governments were priding themselves on doing for Africa. Díaz put an end to internecine warfare, encouraged foreign capital, safeguarded private property, and assisted in the creation of roads, railways, harbours, telegraphs, and post offices. Mexico's indigenous upper class began to fuse with the middle class into a national bourgeoisie endowed with considerable resources. British, French, and, above all, American lenders helped to create a booming oil industry. By 1910, mining had become big business, a start had been made in manufacturing, and Mexico's National University had reached an international reputation, as had Díaz's advisers (the so-called *científicos*, who advocated hard work and economic progress).

The problem was that the *Porfiriato* rested on weak social foundations and, in 1911, the regime suddenly collapsed. The Mexican

revolution was a long drawn-out process, punctuated by coups, countercoups, executions and bloody fighting. The revolutionaries' programme for land reform did not get underway until President Lázaro Cárdenas achieved office (1934 - 1940). Within six years, Cárdenas had liquidated most of the big estates. 45 million acres were distributed in the form of *ejidos* (communal lands owned by groups of peasants). However, land reform met many problems: lack of capital, irrigation, skills, and marketing facilities. The revolutionaries did succeed in breaking the social and political power of the *hacendados* as well as the secular power of the Catholic Church.

Nevertheless, the revolutionaries had aimed for more. They wished to relieve poverty, promote social justice, reduce or eliminate the distinctions of social class, and create a more efficient system of production. Unfortunately, the revolution did not solve the problems of the Mexican countryside. The distribution of land among the poor failed to do away with landlessness, at a time when the population rapidly increased. Mexicans in the areas adjacent to the United States came to enjoy a standard of living higher than the poverty-stricken regions of the center and south.

Land reform did not necessarily lead to improved methods of cultivation or increased production. Owners of *minifundios* (small plots)

were ill-equipped to bring about changes in the methods of production. Wealthy landowners, fearing loss of their farms, often invested their savings in urban areas rather than in the countryside, a common experience in countries subjected to the expropriation of estates. In Mexico, agricultural change was apt to lag behind urban change with far-reaching consequences for Mexico's future social stability.

The revolution also had the unintended consequence of uprooting vast numbers of people and became a great propellant that pushed Mexicans across the border.

A newspaper owner from Mexico recorded in the early 1930s:

"My father died when I was six years old. My mother and my aunt set up a dress-making shop. My sister and I made the cardboard boxes and the hair for the wigs. My mother was making good money until the first revolution came. Orozco's soldiers in 1912 took all our silk goods and hair goods and Singer sewing machines, and burned the stores for which we supplied goods...Then I went to work in my uncle's printing shop...But in 1913 the revolution of Carranza and Villa against Huerta began... The revolutionists came to our city...They remained in the shop until my uncle returned...The officer hit him on the head with a pistol and told the rest of us that he would shoot us all if another paper came out... I was only 15 years old, but I joined the Villa-Carranza army against Huerta. [The Villa

army having been defeated] I later deserted ...I came to the United States on October 4, 1915 with 40 cents [and] finally got a job as a railway worker."

The newcomers to the United States also comprised a number of middle and upper-class people: intellectuals or political men who had adhered to Díaz or who had backed the wrong side in the postrevolutionary upheaval, and businessmen with good connections beyond the border. Light-skinned Mexican Americans with European features wishing to separate themselves from the lot of the common people, increasingly separated themselves from the newcomers and emphasized a "Spanish" legacy. An educated labour migrant in Chicago recorded in the early 1930s:

"I am not ashamed of being a Mexican. But I am not proud of the Mexicans in Chicago. They are mostly Indians of the lower uneducated class of peons. In Mexico, they lived in *chozas* and were servants. Here they live in tumbledown houses and, being unused to having money, spend it ... In Mexico they never mixed with people of learning or a little study. When they come to this country, they still keep apart."

Some Mexican Americans of the upper class cultivated the delusion that old-time residents of the Southwest were of "pure" Spanish blood and thus racially superior to Mexicans.

By the early 1900s, railway construction, the expansion of commercial agriculture, and the development of manufacturing and service industries in the Southwest created a new demand for labour. Above all, the United States provided a sanctuary for refugees fleeing from the bloodshed and misery occasioned by clashes between Mexican revolutionaries, with the United States playing its acustomed role of providing a refuge for political losers.

The number of Mexicans in the United States increased rapidly. They came initially from the Mexican State of Guanajato, then from Michocan, Jalisco, and Zacatecas. They later came from Durango, San Luis Potosí, Aguascalientes, Coahuila, Sinaloa and Tamaulipas.

Well-established Mexicans deplored the departure of their compatriots. Newspapers warned the migrants against the wiles of *enganchadores* (recruiters), and editors thundered against the "Yankee contempt" with which Mexican workmen were apt to be treated beyond the Rio Grande.

There were many causes for the increased emigration from Mexico. Learning that more cash was paid for their labour on the American side of the border, Mexican workmen increasingly made their way to the United States, where they usually gathered in Mexican neighbourhoods. Many southwestern communities invoked property restrictions against Mexicans,

often enforced through "restrictive covenants" against leasing or selling accommodation, a form of discrimination also extended to Jews, Armenians, and other "undesirables". There was also segregation in schools and other public facilities.

After the turn of the century, the total number of Mexican immigrants remained small. The 1910 census reported 162,000 Mexicans compared to 1,088,112 Canadians and 5,670,611 Germans. The Mexican and Mexican-American communities were far from cohesive. They included men and women who were born or permanently settled in the United States as well as short-term immigrants.

Experts calculate that one million people may have died in Mexico during the revolutionary period, the victims of battle, famine and disease. While the United States flourished, Mexico became more impoverished. A generation earlier, the Mexican-American border separated territories that differed little from one another economically. From the turn of the century onward, the frontier marked increasingly striking differences in economic development and social well-being. The American "pull" became even stronger as the wage gap between Mexico and the United States widened. According to historian Mark Reisler, an agricultural labourer in the state of Jalisco in 1905 who worked from sunrise to sunset earned about 13 cents per day in addition to some maize. A truck

labourer in the United States made $1.25 for ten hours' work. If an entire Mexican family migrated to Texas to pick cotton, it could earn as much as $5 a day, nearly 40 times as much as in Jalisco. The Mexicans' lot in their own country during that period further worsened as a result of a rapid rise in the cost of living. Not surprisingly, the United States represented for the labour migrant not a land of bondage but a land of opportunity.

Mexican workers did most of the railway construction and maintenance work in Southern California, New Mexico and Nevada, where they were willing to work for a lower wage than other immigrants. Mexicans also played an important role in agriculture. In Texas, they harvested cotton and vegetables grown on irrigated land. In California, they worked on the great estates, where they gradually dispalced Japanese, Italian and other workmen. By World War I, Mexicans had become the most important single ethnic group in the agriculture of the Imperial Valley of California, having gradually replaced whites and blacks from the American South, Hindus, Chinese, Japanese and others.

World War I gave a further impetus to this migration. Newcomers from Europe rapidly declined in numbers, as would-be fortune seekers from the Old World put on uniforms or were tied to domestic war production.

The demand for Mexican labour grew particularly in the sugar beet industry. During and after World War I, Flemish and German-Russian workmen gradually worked their way up from "stoop labour" in the sugar beet fields to become tenant farmers or independent entrepreneurs. The Flemings' slot at the bottom of the rural hierarchy increasingly came to be filled by Mexicans. A 1927 Bureau of Labour Statistics survey estimated that Mexicans constituted from 75 to 95 percent of the beet workers in Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, Minnesota, Colorado and the Dakotas. Work in the sugar beet fields was a particularly disagreeable occupation because, as an official report put it, "the monotony, difficulty and drudgery of the work, frequently performed in inclement weather, combined with long hours of work and low earnings, make sugar beet field work one which most labourers would avoid if they could find other means of employment."

Tomato picking was even more arduous. It required constant stooping and carrying heavy crates in the broiling sun. Pickers were required to work from daybreak until dark. For this backbreaking work, an experienced adult male worker might earn $1.50 a day; women and children received less. The migrants' living conditions were miserable: they were lodged in barns, tents, abandoned slaughterhouses, abandoned

hotels, and even in straw stacks. Their food was sometimes nothing but bread and beans.

In addition, Mexican workers began to take unskilled and semiskilled work in industry because farm labour was seasonal. By 1914, an increasing number of Mexicans also obtained jobs in mines and factories, where their pay was considerably higher than on American farms. Mexicans began to work in steel, auto and sheet metal plants as well as in oil refineries, textile mills, and many other enterprises.

This occupational shift was linked to geographical shifts operating in two ways: from the countryside to the city , and from the Southwest to other parts of the United States. Los Angeles remained the greatest Mexican-American centre.

In addition to making their way to Los Angeles, Mexicans, especially those intent on remaining in the United States for long periods, began to make their way north and east, beyond the confines of their traditional areas of settlement in the Southwest.

The most important Mexican centre in the Midwest was Chicago. Immigration on a substantial scale began in 1916 with the recruitment of about two-hundred railroad track workers from the Texas-Mexico border. The 1920 census counted twelve hundred Mexicans in the city, most of whom worked for the railroads, steel plants and meat-packing houses. By